

ALBANIA (*Shqipëri*)



QUICK FACTS

Population: 3 million

Area: 28,748 square km (slightly smaller than Maryland)

Capital: Tirana (pop. 454,000)

Languages: Albanian (Official), Greek

EDUCATION

Primary education is mandatory in Albania (grades 1-9), and secondary education (grades 10-12) is common. Students must pass exams in the 9th and 12th grades if they wish to advance to the next stage of their education. The literacy rate stands at 97.6%. Most schools are public, but many suffer from overcrowded classrooms and shortages of classroom materials. As a result, private schools (fairly new to Albania) are becoming more popular. Albania uses a 10-point grading scale.



Albanians celebrating at a festival

Albania is located in the Balkan region of Southeastern Europe. It is a mountainous country that shares a border with Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, with access to the Adriatic Sea. The greatest hero of Albanian history is the warlord and military genius Skanderbeg, who successfully resisted the Ottoman occupation of Albania during his lifetime. After his death, the Ottoman Empire conquered Albania, which had a tremendous effect on Albanian culture, religion, and artistic production. Independence finally came for the Albanians during the revolt of 1912. Before long, however, Albania faced invasion again, this time by the Italians (1939), and then the Germans (1943), during WWII. Albanian communist partisans led by Enver Hoxha were crucial in the liberation of the country, and Albanians sheltered hundreds of Jews from the Holocaust. The Communist Party maintained power in Albania until March 1992. Today, Albania is a parliamentary republic, and a member of NATO.

RELIGION

Christianity was well established in Albania by the early Middle Ages, but after centuries of Ottoman rule, Islam became the majority religion. Today, about 57% of the population is Muslim, with 10% Catholic and 7% Orthodox Christian. In 1967, the communist government closed all mosques and churches, declaring Albania to be the world's first atheist nation. The ban was lifted in 1990, but the population remains largely secular in its religious practice.

ETHNICITY

Albania is an ethnically homogenous country, with the largest minority group, Greeks, standing at 0.9% of the total population. The Albanian language is also dominant, but is split into two prominent dialects: Gheg in the north and Tosk in the south. From 1991-2004, 900,000 Albanians emigrated out of Albania (many to Greece), due mostly to economic hardship.

FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS

When entering an Albanian home, a female member of the household will usually offer a treat and a drink, like coffee. *Besa* is an important Albanian precept meaning "to keep the promise." Important Albanian holidays include Ramadan (early January), Independence Day (28 Nov.), Liberation Day (from the Germans, 29 Nov.), Christmas, and New Year's Eve.



CONTEMPORARY ALBANIA

The fall of the communism came relatively late in Albania, in March 1992, amid strikes and economic turmoil. Since then, corruption and unemployment have consistently undermined Albania's efforts to transition to capitalism and democracy. In the early 1990s, up to one third of the country's population became caught up in government-supported Ponzi schemes. The crisis culminated in 1997, with economic disaster and political turmoil that led to the intervention of UN peacekeeping forces and the collapse of the government. The Socialist Party won the 1997 elections, and stability was restored. Since then, Albania has strived to improve relations and integrate with the West. Albania supported the NATO intervention against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 (hoping to protect Kosovo Albanians), joined NATO in 2009, dispatched military troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, and became a EU candidate country in 2014.

Profound difficulties still remain to be solved in Albania. The majority of the population works in agriculture at a subsistence level, deprived of modern agricultural equipment. The inadequate energy and transportation infrastructure, governmental corruption, complex tax codes, and the presence of very powerful mafia organizations, have made Albania unappealing to foreign investment. Albanian economic ties with Greece (particularly in the financial sector) exposed them to harm during the Eurozone debt crisis, and decreased tourism has contributed to high unemployment and stagnating GDP in recent years.



(Ruins of Butrint Theater, Sarandë)

ALBANIANS IN THE USA

The first Albanians began to emigrate to the United States in the early 20th century, but large scale migration did not begin until after World War II, when thousands fled the Albanian communist regime (or were evicted from Albania or Greece for alleged collaboration with Germany and Italy). A new wave of immigration occurred after the fall of the communism. Today, the Albanian-American community numbers over 200,000, and is most heavily concentrated in New York, Michigan, and Massachusetts.



Red background symbolizes bravery, strength, and valor. In the center is a black silhouetted double-headed eagle.



(Skanderbeg Square, Tirana)

NAMES

Albanian names consist of a given name, the given name of the individual's father, and a family name. Family names commonly end in -aj. Historically, names were often religious, but this was discouraged after the communist takeover. Typical male names include Arben, Ilir, and Agim. Typical female names include Mimoza, Vabona, and Lindita.

FAMOUS ALBANIANS

Skanderbeg, who resisted the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century; Mohammad Ali Pasha, who would go on to rule in Egypt; Catholic nun and missionary Mother Teresa; Footballer Lorik Cuna; Albanian-American comedians John and Jim Belushi; Albanian-British singer Rita Ora

ALBANIAN WORDS

Hello Tungjatjeta
How are you? Si jeni?
Welcome!..... Mirë se vini!
My name is... Unë quhem...
Excuse me Më falni
Yes Po
No..... Jo
I understand..... Unë kuptoj
I don't understand..... Nuk kuptoj
Thank you!..... Faleminderit!

USEFUL LINKS

- <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17679574>
- <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/al.html>
- <http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Afghanistan-to-Bosnia-Herzegovina/Albanians.html>